Olga Lepeshinskaya

Prima ballerina with the Bolshoi who was showered with prizes and red roses by an entranced Josef Stalin

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Olga Lepeshinskaya, who died in Moscow on December 20 aged 92, was the Bolshoi Ballet's prima ballerina in the 1930s and 1940s and Josef Stalin's favourite performer – rumoured to be her lover, he would bring red roses to her dressing room after performances, and he decorated her four times with the Stalin Prize.

Her combination of phenomenal virtuosity and irresistible exuberance made her the queen of comic ballet roles such as Kitri in Don Quixote and Swanilda in Coppelia, in which she would bring the house down with her extraordinary flying jump and top-speed precision.

She made herself additionally interesting to Stalin by her work for the Communist Party, and the dictator hailed her as the model Soviet ballerina, the epitome of dazzle, energy and social positivity. This enthusiasm, however, did not protect her first husband, an intelligence chief whom Stalin jailed for plotting against him; Lepeshinskaya divorced him on the ground that he was "an enemy of the people".

Olga Lepeshinskaya's position as Stalin's darling saw her performing inside the Kremlin at banquets of great luxury. In a recent interview she recalled his whispering to her that she should not dance in a tutu but in something lighter, "between friends". From then on she ensured she was lightly dressed when invited by him.

Her strength of character was evident when, in 1952, she danced a three-act performance to the end despite fracturing her leg during the first act. No one believed she was injured until she collapsed unconscious at the curtain call, and doctors confirmed fractures in four places. Three months later she was dancing another premiere.

Lepeshinskaya headed a crack team of Bolshoi ballet dancers who danced to the troops on the front line throughout the Second World War. Active in Communist politics from her teens, she was elected to Moscow's city council in 1941, aged 25, and became as famous and feared for her Bolshevik loyalties as for her dancing.

While performing to soldiers in Warsaw in 1945, she heard that her reward would be the leading role in the first ballet staging of Sergei Prokofiev's new score, Cinderella, choreographed by Rostislav Zakharov. At the Bolshoi Theatre premiere that autumn, Stalin was so delighted with her performance that he awarded her the first of her unprecedented four Stalin Prizes. Over the next six years her devoted fan – whom she called "Little Father" – awarded further prizes after her three most important premieres, and sealed his approval in 1951 by investing her as a People's Artist of the USSR.

In old age, Olga Lepeshinskaya looked back on Stalin more critically, describing him as "a vindictive and bad man, like all orientals".

Olga Vasilievna Lepeshinskaya was born in Kiev on September 15 1916 into a noble

Polish family. Her father, an engineer, worked for years on construction of the Far Eastern railway on the Chinese border.

Though an enthusiastic performer almost from infancy, Olga originally wanted to follow her father's profession, and fell into dance only by chance, aged nine, when her family was on holiday in the Crimea and she was spotted by a former Bolshoi dancer who recommended she take formal training. Although she failed her first audition for the Moscow Ballet School, she got in by default when a successful candidate fell ill.

Olga Lepeshinskaya's progress was so rapid that, at the age of 17, she was the first pupil in 120 years to graduate from the Moscow Ballet School straight to the top rank of the Bolshoi Ballet. At 18 she took the lead in Gorsky's version of La fille mal gardée, entrancing both the critics and the public with her spectacular energy and joyous brilliance. She followed this with triumphs in a stream of new ballets: Igor Moiseyev's Three Fat Men; Fyodor Lopukhov's Bright Stream; Zakharov's Prisoner in the Caucasus; and Svetlana, by a trio of Bolshoi choreographers.

She also proved her classical worth as Princess Aurora in The Sleeping Beauty, Masha in The Nutcracker, and as Kitri in Don Quixote, in which her partner, the Bolshoi star Maris Liepa, recalled her "absolutely phenomenal life force" and "fantastic charm".

During Stalin's years of terror, the bright, bravura roles in which she was pre-eminent suited the Soviet mentality better than the more reflective classical roles in which other colleagues overshadowed her. In the notoriously tricky leading role of the happy-go-lucky Spanish girl Kitri, Olga Lepeshinskaya raised the bar to a technical level that some claim has never been eclipsed for fiery excitement. The Bolshoi's present prima ballerina, Svetlana Zakharova, observed recently that nobody today could keep up with Lepeshinskaya's tempo.

During and after the war Olga Lepeshinskaya reinforced her position as the Bolshoi's leading ballerina in premieres of many contemporary ballets on Soviet themes; these included, for Zakharov, Taras Bulba and Bronze Horseman, and Lavrovsky's Red Poppy and Fadetta. Most of her roles were morale-boosters for the public, showcasing her indomitability and soubrette flirtatiousness.

Because of her virtuosity and prettiness, Olga Lepeshinskaya's short, muscular body was forgiven. But her lack of adagio grace circumscribed her impact as an expressive artist, and when the Bolshoi made its first tours to Britain and the United States in the 1950s, she was not requested to appear. Her subtler colleagues Galina Ulanova and Raisa Struchkova were the first Bolshoi ballerinas to conquer the West, and Olga

Lepeshinskaya was fated to remain only a name to Western audiences.

By then Stalin had been replaced by Khrushchev, and Olga Lepeshinskaya was passing 40. Her vitality and bravura were being matched by the young Maya Plisetskaya, who later described Lepeshinskaya as "justifiably feared in the theatre world, in spite of the smile which she lavished upon everyone".

She had also changed husbands. Her first husband, General Leonid Reichman (sometimes transliterated as Raikhman), was chief interrogator of the NKVD, the KGB's precursor, and as head of the NKVD's Polish office was involved with concealing the massacre by the Soviets in 1940 of many thousands of Polish officers at Katyn. He was appointed deputy chief of Smersh by Stalin's colleague and rival Lavrenty Beria, and in 1951 was jailed by Stalin under suspicion of involvement in the "doctors' plot" against him.

On his release in 1956 (he lived until 1991) Reichman agreed to divorce Lepeshinskaya so that she could marry General Alexei Antonov of the Soviet Army, a happy marriage cut short by Antonov's sudden death five years later. The shock of his death caused Olga Lepeshinskaya to lose her sight, and she was forced to quit the stage.

An operation in Italy a year later restored her vision, and she launched a new career as an international teacher and leading figure in Soviet ballet training and cultural relations.

In the mid-1960s she helped to establish the ballet company for the Berlin Comic Opera, and for 10 years was its coach before returning to Moscow.

To her four Stalin Prizes (1941, 1946, 1947 and 1950) and her status as People's Artist of the USSR were added further patriotic awards, including an Order of Lenin, two Orders of Red Labour and the Order of the October Revolution.

In 2000 Olga Lepeshinskaya was awarded a Soul of Dance prize by the Russian magazine Ballet. She also received various honours from Germany, Sweden, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, Albania and the Philippines.

She was a deputy on the Committee of Soviet Women, and later chairman of the Central House of Art Workers. She regularly chaired the organising committee and jury of the celebrated Moscow International Ballet Competition and withdrew from her public activities only in the last decade of her life.

There were no children from her two marriages.